

THE HONOR OF A PLEBEIAN

By ELEANOR M. INGRAM

IT was early morning and the great cathedral was almost empty. Few people cared to attend mass at such an inconvenient hour, especially French people. In Italy or Austria it might be different, but here only a few women listened to the open notes of the organ. Yet the place was very beautiful in the dim light; so beautiful that the American who entered sank into the first seat that presented itself, feeling his automobile costume incongruous, almost irreverent.

He had come because everyone who passed through Rouen was expected to visit the cathedral and he was quite unprepared for the strange awe which affected him as the service proceeded. The musical Latin words in themselves pleased him, recalling vaguely that he had been taken to hear them long ago.

Unconsciously, his attitude was distinctly removed from that of the usual tourist, and the women nearest stole furtive glances of approval at the tall American with his grave, firm face and clear gray eyes. John Egerton was a contradiction of nature. His grandfather wore shirt sleeves, and boiled soap, his father increased the industry to the largest soap factory in America. Egerton himself raised soap making to a fine art and enjoyed it, yet no descendant "of a hundred earls" could have been more emphatically a gentleman. It was not only his appearance, the quiet bearing, the direct gaze, the air of fine-

ness, but his very instinct. In the tangle and haste of modern business life he held himself proudly erect, he neither deceived nor cheated, nor took any unfair advantage of his rivals and associates. But most of all he hated the shadow of an untruth.

"Egerton is as clean as his soap," some one said of him once, and men laughed and remembered the very American simile. He was a college man with a taste for old books, music and all the artistic side of life, but he frankly and unaffectedly liked his immense factories around which had grown up a little village bearing the name of his famous soap. Everyone used Coral Soap, everyone had heard of Coraldale.

That is, everyone in the United States—here in the quaint French town he was simply the last *Monsieur Anglais*.

The mass was very long, but Egerton listened in dreamy contentment. He was sorry when the final notes of the organ announced the approaching end. Suddenly he was conscious of a change in the atmosphere of the church, and turning his head perceived that the sun had risen high enough to throw its light through the great stained glass windows. A flood of radiant color filled the place, crimson, rich violet and amber, and idly following the rays his eyes encountered the figure of a young girl kneeling on the stone pavement. He leaned forward, his attention arrested. Her face was lifted toward the altar, its

delicate loveliness ethereal in the sea of color around her, her great dark eyes dilated by the intensity of feeling that possessed her. Over her head was flung a black lace scarf and through its meshes gleamed heavy braids of chestnut hair.

Egerton scarcely dared move lest he break the exquisite beauty of the picture. She typified the spirit of the place, he thought, and the fancy passed through his mind that he could never see her without recalling the tones of the organ and the clinging perfume of incense.

For he knew he would see her again. He was so certain of it that he did not even put the resolve in the form of words, but it was none the less strong and complete.

When at last the others rose and moved toward the doors with subdued whispers and rustlings, she rose also and signaled to the maid who accompanied her. Egerton was nearer the exit and when she reached the door he was holding it open.

"*Je vous remercie, Monsieur,*" she said with a singular softness of voice and accent. The momentary glance was clear and direct as his own.

"She is of gentle birth, and she is not French," Egerton thought, closing the door.

"You will find a garage, Dubois," he said to the chauffeur as he stepped into the car, "I shall stay in Rouen some time."

That afternoon he called on Father Antoine of the cathedral.

"*Mon père,*" he said in his irreproachable French, "you will confer an inestimable favor upon me by telling me the name of the lady who knelt beneath the Saint Mark window this morning."

The priest looked at him keenly.

"I observed you watching her, Monsieur. That is Mademoiselle de Guzman."

"She is Spanish, then?"

"But yes. Her father, M. le Comte de Guzman, six years ago was forced to leave Spain because of his Carlist sympathies. Very aristocratic, Monsieur, and very poor."

Egerton nodded, he was thinking rapidly.

"*Mon père,*" he said deliberately, "I am a stranger in Rouen and so under a disadvantage. I wish most earnestly to make Mademoiselle my wife; will you assist me to meet her?"

The priest gave an exclamation of astonishment.

"*Comment, Monsieur?* You wish to marry a lady you do not know?"

"Exactly; will you help me?"

"You would have me introduce you to M. de Guzman?"

"No," Egerton answered decidedly, "not yet, *mon père*. I am wealthy and I know how continental marriages are managed. I desire to leave Mademoiselle the right of rejection, it is possible her parents would deprive her of it. I seek some way of meeting her before presenting myself to M. de Guzman."

"You ask me to incur a responsibility, Monsieur," Father Antoine said with hesitation. Egerton smiled.

"I would hardly come to you, *mon père*, if my intentions were not honorable. Permit me to offer you this packet of letters, if their examination convinces you of my identity, I trust you will not refuse me your aid."

He laid the package on the table and rose.

"I will read as a matter of form, Monsieur," the priest answered courteously, "and I will tell you that I know a worthy woman who keeps a *pension* and whom Mademoiselle frequently visits. If after reflection it seems well to me, I will send you her address."

"I thank you, *mon père,*" Egerton said warmly.

They shook hands, Father Antoine studying him curiously.

"You Americans are wonderful, Monsieur," he observed with naïve admiration.

"*Je le crois bien.*" Egerton laughed. He did not himself comprehend this sudden madness under which his steady nerves quivered and throbbed. He simply accepted the fact.

That evening the letters were returned to his hotel, accompanied by a card which bore the words, "Madame Felix Marcel, 23 Rue Leclair."

The next morning the American moved from his suite at the Hotel Savarin to a small hot room in Madame Marcel's diminutive cottage, and contemplated the change with infinite satisfaction.

Egerton would have liked to attend the mass again, but somehow he could not bring himself to use the church as a cloak for his desire to see Mademoiselle de Guzman, to feign an interest in the service he did not feel. It savored to him of deception. So he waited and passed the time in making friends with his hostess.

Madame was quite willing, her pride was intense when the great auto stood shuddering before her door, half filling the narrow street and surrounded by an admiring circle of boys; and she liked the tall American who conferred such distinction. Soon he was a welcome guest in her quaint parlor where he would sit smoking and listening to interminable reminiscences of "*feu M. Marcel.*"

Egerton waited in patience and at the end of a week he met his reward. He entered the room one afternoon to find Madame talking volubly to a slender girl in black. Even before she turned he knew her. Madame's birdlike quickness prevented any possibility of embarrassment.

"Ah, Monsieur, I am enchanted. Mademoiselle, permit that I present

M. Egerton of whom I have spoken. Mademoiselle de Guzman, Monsieur."

They bowed, the young girl coloring faintly as she recognized the stranger of the past Sunday. Egerton thought her even more lovely than he had recollected—the cathedral might miss her presence but she did not need the setting of the cathedral. He looked at her almost reverently.

Madame Marcel gave them little opportunity for conversation and indeed Egerton was rather glad of her incessant chattering during this first interview. He did not know quite what to say without saying too much.

Mademoiselle did not stay very long, her maid was waiting, she said. Without exactly knowing how, Egerton divined that the family kept only one servant and she was needed at home.

When Mademoiselle rose to go he opened the door again. This time her gaze faltered before his expression.

"*Je vous remercie, Monsieur,*" she said with the same soft slurring of the syllables.

"*Es para mi un placer, Señorita,*" he answered smiling.

She started and looked at him wonderingly.

"You understand Spanish, Monsieur?" she exclaimed.

"A little, Mademoiselle."

"And French and English," broke in Madame Marcel excitedly. "Monsieur is then a linguist of the most remarkable."

But Mademoiselle was already gone.

After that John Egerton scarcely left the little parlor. Day after day the car waited unused while correspondence accumulated on the round marble table upstairs. Mademoiselle came perhaps twice a week.

At first conversation was limited to a monologue by Madame Marcel, but gradually she became aware of Egerton's absorption and the situa-



"Even Before She Turned, He Knew Her"

tion dawned on her. *Ciel*, what an establishment for Mademoiselle!

So Egerton found himself at liberty to talk with the lady of his heart while Madame his hostess busied herself with a long strip of knitting and listened approvingly.

He discovered she was very different from the young girls he had met in America, very gentle and sympathetic, but with a passionate love and appreciation of the fiery chivalrous legends of her native country. Some of them she told him, one especially of her famous ancestor Alonso de Guzman, who saw his eldest son slain before the walls of Tarifa rather than yield the fortress entrusted to

him by the king. In return he once related the story of the Serapis.

"But Paul Jones was not my ancestor," he concluded laughingly. "I have none, you know."

She smiled too, although a troubled expression came into her eyes.

It was a month before he dared say what had lain on his lips the first day. She was so daintily proud and bore herself with such innocent dignity. And of course Madame never left them alone.

Still it could not last forever, and one day at a touch, a glance, some trifle that meant nothing and everything, Egerton's reserve was swept

away before the suddenly released flood of passion.

"I love you," he exclaimed in Spanish, his voice low and shaken with the intensity of feeling. "Mademoiselle, I loved you that first day in the cathedral. I—oh, I have no words, there are none. I love you, I love you."

Her splendid eyes blazed into a fire equal to his own.

"And I you," she answered with a pride too great to seek evasion, a simple truth that was more modest than any coquetry.

He took her hand and kissed it.

"I will go to your father to-morrow. You will come with me across the ocean, to my home, you care enough for that? Ah, say it again, it is too wonderful."

They looked deep into each other's eyes.

Madame Marcel surveyed them benevolently and rattled her scissors as a mild warning that they were not alone.

The Spanish was but a transparent veil to their conversation and her recollection of "*feu* M. Marcel" enabled her to translate it instinctively.

"I must go," Mademoiselle murmured, rising.

Egerton detained her a moment.

"Must I call you Mademoiselle even in my heart?" he asked. "Dear, I do not know your name."

She smiled a little, flushed with happiness.

"I knew yours long ago, Monsieur. I am called Beatriz."

She slipped from him and crossed to Madame to make her adieux.

After she had gone Egerton sought Father Antoine.

"I would like to meet M. de Guzman now," he announced calmly.

The priest looked at him sharply.

"Bon, in six weeks! *Je vous en félicité, Monsieur.*"

Egerton's brows contracted.

"Will you introduce me, *mon père?*" he asked coldly.

"I will do more," was the prompt reply. "In France there are things one does not do one's self, Monsieur, and this is such a case. Give me again those letters and I will explain to M. le Comte."

"It is too soon; you forget that he does not know me," Egerton said, startled. "And, pardon me, but I would prefer to make my request in person."

"One always knows a millionaire," Father Antoine retorted dryly. "This is not America, Monsieur, *laissez moi faire.*"

The American tapped his finger thoughtfully on the table.

"Very well," he said at last, "I will accept your kindness, *mon père*, and I am sincerely grateful."

"*Bien,*" said the priest. "Now to business, Monsieur."

They drew their chairs closer together.

The next day Egerton spent in arranging the letters and papers received during the last few weeks. A restless fever of energy possessed him, and he would not go out although feeling instinctively that Mademoiselle would not come again.

Late in the afternoon Father Antoine called to see him, his black eyes twinkling with satisfaction.

"But it is warm, Monsieur," he exclaimed as he entered. "Fancy that the streets are unbearable, and the sun——" He sank into a chair, wiping his brow.

"And the affair?" Egerton demanded anxiously.

"*C'est tout arrangée.* To-morrow you dine with M. and Madame de Guzman, also you will be presented to Mademoiselle, whom it is understood you have only seen at church. These meetings here, that is nothing, that is ignored. Of course, there is still much detail to be arranged be-

tween the Comte and you. Ah, but the heat is to suffocate; really, I must implore a glass of *eau sucre, mon cher Monsieur.*"

"Twenty if you will," Egerton laughed, his gray eyes brilliant.

"*Mais non, Monsieur,* one," the priest answered, fanning himself with his broad brimmed hat. "Ah, I forgot. There is only one requirement made of you; your family."

Egerton stopped, his hand on the bell-cord.

"My family, *mon père?*"

"Perfectly. M. le Comte requires absolutely that you can trace your ancestry back a hundred years or so. It is natural, the de Guzmans are nearly as old as Spain itself, and proud. I assured him that there would be no difficulty, one sees that you are an aristocrat, Monsieur."

"Thank you," the American said slowly, "and without that?"

"There is nothing, not if Monsieur were a thousand times a millionaire."

"With your permission, I will go in search of the *eau sucre*, Madame does not hear the bell," Egerton suggested after an instant's pause, and left the room before the other could protest.

When he returned with the desired beverage his manner was even more English in its composure than usual. He listened half an hour to Father Antoine's gay chatter and expressed ample and courteous appreciation of his services. But when he was left alone again, he went out and flung himself into the great auto and drove out over the smooth French roads at a rate that threatened destruction or arrest.

His ancestry, his, whose grandfather boiled soap and peddled it through a shabby western town. He could have laughed at the miserable jest and gone back to fight it out alone, but for Mademoiselle—Mademoiselle whom he had deliberately taught to love him. He had not the

right to leave her even if he had the strength.

Darkness had fallen when he stopped before Madame Marcel's cottage and went into the sitting-room.

"Madame," he said abruptly, "can you carry a note to Mademoiselle de Guzman so that it will not be observed?"

His hostess looked up wonderingly.

"*Mais oui, Monsieur,* but——"

"It is for a good purpose," he interrupted, and seating himself at her desk took a sheet of the absurd blue notepaper in which she delighted.

"Mademoiselle," he wrote, "forgive me for taking this way of reaching you, I have no other. I beg you to tell me whether you would have answered me differently yesterday if you had believed me of humble birth, *bourgeois*, peasant perhaps. I ask it earnestly, as I love you with all my heart."

He read it, dissatisfied, yet unable to do better. At last he signed it almost impatiently.

"You will hasten?" he asked wearily of Madame who was watching with interest.

She nodded sympathetically.

"I'll fly there, Monsieur."

He paced the floor while she was gone, his tall figure strangely out of place in the gaudy little room with its cheap ornaments and superfluous bows of pink ribbon. He glanced often at the chair Mademoiselle usually chose, it seemed pathetically empty and deserted in the dim light.

When at last the key grated in the lock Egerton opened the door himself. Madame held out an envelope, rendered speechless for once by heat and exertion. He tore it open and read the few lines under the flickering hall lamp:

"I do not understand, Monsieur, but there is nothing in the world could change my answer, or make me less faithfully, Beatriz de Guzman."

"*C'est bien, n'est ce pas?*" smiled Madame.

"Very well," the American replied, but his face was very grave as he turned away.

Next day the car purred through Rouen like a gigantic cat and made its way again out over miles of country roads.

This time, however, it returned before sunset, and an hour later bore its master to the tiny home of M. le Comte de Guzman, nobleman of Spain, possessing even in exile the right to claim the title of "*Primo*" from his offended king, and to whom this night's dinner had been a serious problem.

Spare, erect, with fine clear features, he received Egerton in the threadbare room with the same stately ceremony he would have shown in a palace if he had happened to possess one.

His wife betrayed a little more her gratification and consciousness of what this meant to them. Women find poverty more difficult than men. Secretly they were both surprised and delighted by Egerton's bearing and appearance. Even the gravity he could not shake off appealed to them as resembling their own reserve.

After half an hour of conventional conversation Madame de Guzman went in search of Beatriz and formally introduced them, the young girl standing with downcast eyes and flushed cheeks as Egerton kissed her hand.

The dinner was very simple, although divided into many courses and elaborately served by the solitary maid. The American took a sullen satisfaction in noting the mended tablecloth, the worn velvet of Madame's gown, the carefully darned lace that shaded Beatriz's slim throat. At least he could save them from poverty and in that he strove to find some consolation for what he must do. Yet

his repugnance for it was so strong that he could have put out his hand to detain the Comtesse and Mademoiselle when they rose to leave the dining-room.

The Spaniard was the first to break the silence that followed.

"Father Antoine has acquainted me, Monsieur, with the honor you wish to do our family. Doubtless he has communicated to you the pleasure it affords us, pleasure increased a thousandfold since I have had the gratification of meeting you."

Egerton bowed, and seeing an answer was expected forced himself to speak.

"I indeed understand that I might hope for the happiness of being honored with Mademoiselle's hand, M. le Comte."

"The esteem I have for you, M. Egerton, causes me to welcome the idea with joy," the old nobleman returned ceremoniously. "There is only one question, matters of business we will of course leave to our notaries. I refer to your family, Monsieur. It is merely a matter of form; that you are of our caste is visible to the most casual observer, but the question is a custom of our house. I know already that you are engaged in trade. We Spaniards do not measure nobility by idleness and that does not affect my meaning."

There was an instant's pause. "It is for Beatriz," Egerton repeated to himself, "for Beatriz." He raised his head and met the other's gaze steadily.

"Of course, M. le Comte, the demand is natural. The first Egerton was knighted in England in the Seventeenth century, but for several generations we have been Americans. If you will give me a month I will bring a detailed record from the United States."

The promise was made with a grim knowledge of the power of money to

fulfill it, but de Guzman made a gesture of negation.

"It is not necessary, Monsieur; the word of a gentleman is sufficient. Shall we join Madame?"

A dull red flamed in Egerton's face. Not even the thought of Beatriz could lessen his sense of eternal degradation. He had voluntarily assumed the stain that nothing could remove.

A month later they were married very quietly. Rouen had become intolerable to Egerton and his affairs demanded a prompt return to America. His generosity in the marriage arrangements was extravagant, almost feverish. The *corbeille* with which he presented his *fiancée* was the admiration of the Parisians who prepared it. It seemed to him the only reparation possible and he carried it to the extreme.

But of what lay on his heart he did not speak until he was alone with his wife in the compartment of the train. Then, with his eyes fixed on the flying landscape he told her in a few curt words.

"There was no other way," he concluded half defiantly. "I could not sacrifice you to my pride and, I lied."

She had sat motionless, breathless, but at the last word she gave a broken cry and sinking forward let her head rest on his arm.

"You did that for me? Juan, Juan, forgive me! How can I ever deserve it, you to bear that shame for me? Oh, I love you——"

He caught her to him.

"You do not despise me, then, my wife?"

"The daughters of my house have wedded princes, but never was one so honored in her marriage day as I." Her voice rang with conviction, her eyes flashed through their tears. Egerton drew her closer.

"There is no woman except you who could understand," he said unsteadily.

But even at that moment he felt the humiliation that would cling to him as long as he lived, for he had broken his own law.

ST. VALENTINE

By CURTIS H. PAGE

St. Valentine was a valiant saint,
Born for a soldier, I surmise,
For he never felt his heart grow faint
To look in a lady's eyes.

Yet mouth of cannon or muzzle of gun,
Pistol, or blunderbuss,
All things by which destruction's done,
Are far less dangerous.